

Statement of Senator Frank Murkowski  
Senate Commerce Committee  
Subcommittee on Aviation  
July 25, 2000

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you to testify on my bill (S.1855) allowing pilots to fly up to the age of 65.

Adoption of this legislation would have a significant impact on the issue before you--the quality and quantity of air service to rural communities. Quite frankly, there is a serious pilot shortage in America and its greatest impact is being felt in rural communities, including in my home state of Alaska. I have heard from many small Alaskan air carriers on the difficulty they are having keeping pilots and even finding pilots to hire. In fact, one carrier in my hometown of Fairbanks has asked that I consider changing the HBI visa status of pilots so he can hire foreign pilots.

As you all know, pilots are leaving small carriers, regionals and flight schools because they can earn more money flying for the major commercial air carriers. This has a devastating effect on service to rural and remote areas because the smaller carriers just do not have the financial resources to compete with the offers of the major airlines.

According to a report in the May 29 issue of Aviation Week, to ease the pilot shortage at U.S. airlines and create business opportunities for Canadian based flight training schools, an informal study is being done by the FAA and Transport Canada to establish equivalent pilot certification standards. While that may put more pilots in the pipeline, it will not provide the level of experience necessary in the cockpit. How will that enhance safety in the industry? Airbiz Jet News reports that United Airlines is hiring more pilots

pilots over 60. However, the FAA has missed several opportunities to get first hand information and has let other opportunities lapse. Let me share some examples with you.

The 1996 commuter rule made special provisions to allow pilots who were then flying to continue to fly for four more years at which time the age 60 rule would become effective. Commuter airlines were also allowed to continue to hire pilots 60 and older for 15 months. The FAA had 4 solid years to test pilots flying over the age of 60 around this country and get scientific data on the skills and reflexes of these pilots. However, the FAA did not conduct such studies.

Secondly, litigation was brought by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

If we don't seriously look at raising retirement ages for Pt. 121 pilots, I can assure you that many rural communities will find that their aviation lifeline to the rest of the country will be closed down. Residents in New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago will not notice any changes in air service, but the pilot shortage will deeply affect the residents of Missoula Montana, Ketchikan, Alaska and all the other small communities who are desperately trying stay alive. We must make this change and I urge quick Committee action.